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SUBJECT: ADVANCING WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN A FUNDAMENTALIST  
COMMUNITY: PRINCESS NOURA AND THE LADIES OF QASSIM

REF: A) RIYADH 875 B) RIYADH 860 C) JEDDAH 78

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Classified By: CDA Ambassador Richard Erdman, 1.4 (b),(d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Advocating women,s rights in Saudi Arabia is a difficult task under the best of circumstances. In Qassim Province north of Riyadh, deep in the Kingdom,s conservative Nejd heartland, it can be life-threatening. Despite the many obstacles, a courageous and assertive Princess, Noura bint Mohammed, has taken a moribund state-organized women,s NGO and turned it into a dynamic and broad-based network of committees providing social and economic support to women coping with poverty, isolation, and cultural strictures. In this fundamentalist Wahhabi community, her work provides an important counterpoint to the appeal of extremist ideology and the impact of the Saudi government,s struggle against domestic terrorism. Post has cooperated discreetly with Princess Noura for four years, and recently visited Qassim to assess the status of her efforts. The work of the Qassim women is consistent with that of other Saudi women activists who aim to build a more cohesive Saudi women,s movement focused on pragmatic steps to improve women,s rights (Ref A). (End summary.)

AN ACTIVIST PRINCESS BUILDS  
A NETWORK OF SUPPORT FOR WOMEN  
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¶2. (C) Princess Noura bint Mohammed, wife of the Governor of Qassim, has single handedly nurtured her organization, the Women,s Committees of Qassim, into a grassroots counterweight to the impact of terrorism and the appeal of extreme fundamentalism in the heart of the Nejd, the most conservative region of Saudi Arabia. In the nine years since she joined husband Prince Faisal bin Bandar bin Abdulaziz in the Governor,s palace in Qassim, Noura bint Mohammed has, largely through the force of her personality, taken a relatively moribund state-organized NGO, the King Abdulaziz Philanthropic Association (KAPA) for Women, and re-energized it by using it as the framework for a number of activist cells,: the Women,s Committee of Qassim and its growing constituent committees, including a Patients, Committee, a Breast Cancer Awareness Committee, a Diabetes Awareness Committee, an Environment Awareness Committee, and a Friends of Martyrdom Committee. These Committees have empowered the women of Qassim to take socially and politically daring steps to deal with poverty and fundamentalist suspicion, as well as women,s health issues, children,s education programs, and micro-finance projects.

AN UNFORSEEN BUT VITAL ROLE  
IN HELPING PREVENT RADICALIZATION  
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13. (SBU) Her program took on an urgent political role, for which it was uniquely suited, in 2004/2005 when the Saudi state, reeling from terrorist attacks in Riyadh, discovered that a large number of the soldiers and policemen killed in battles with extremists hailed from Qassim. The Royal family recognized the immediate need -- and the PR value -- for aiding the stricken families of these soldiers, who were potentially vulnerable to radicalization themselves if they weren't properly cared for. The Princess's organization stepped in, assigning individual women to mentor the family of each martyr who had died protecting the Kingdom from terrorism.

14. (SBU) The Women's Committee representatives oversaw the education of these families, children, visited their homes to ensure they were receiving proper social and health care, and intervened with authorities if they were not. The Committee could step into this quickly and effectively because it had succeeded in establishing a structure of collaboration with government ministries in Qassim. The Committee continues to stage several events a year to bring the families together to meet with the King and other dignitaries who provide the children with gifts. The impact of these events is revealed in KAPA's NGO presentation (shared with Post), which shows a picture of King Abdullah so moved during a reception for the families of the martyred men that he is weeping in the presence of their children.

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IDENTIFYING AND MOTIVATING LEADERS AND MANAGERS  
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15. (SBU) The Princess's success rests in large part on her ability to identify and motivate community leaders and managers for her programs. Like a European princess of old, she has surrounded herself with the provincial female elite: the few Ph.D.s and Masters Degree holders; the wives of academics, bankers, and businessmen; the small, but vital number of professional women from the Ministries, the local hospitals, and the universities; the English speakers; and those who have traveled beyond the conservative confines of the region. These women form her volunteer base, and several times a month she hosts groups of them at her home. She charges them up with pep-talk style descriptions of their successes and encouraging words describing what they have done and how important they are to the people of Qassim. Many of the professional women wear two hats, one for their government and professional work, and another for their avocation in the Qassim Women's Committees.

16. (SBU) Another key to the Princess's success has been her ability to identify competent managers for her programs. She recruited a talented Jordanian project manager to advise and oversee KAPA's Saudi directors, keeping the organization's daily operations flowing for the last four years, while the Princess herself focused on fundraising.

NO WORK FOR THE TIMID  
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17. (C) Volunteering for one of the Qassim women's committees involves considerably more than tea parties. In the hyper-conservative cultural climate of Qassim, physical courage is often necessary as well. Several activists

described the tough physical and social conditions they face in carrying out their work in remote villages and towns. They noted they always have the Princess,s personal cell phone number at hand in case they run into problems with overzealous authorities, the ubiquitous Muttawwa "religious police," or suspicious husbands or male relatives. Problems can occur even though KAPA works closely with the Ministry of Interior and other ministries to vet the families it is working with.

¶8. (C) The Mother/Child Home-based Education Program carries many potential risks for committee members, who carefully stage appointments, usually when the male head of the family is out. The program meets with mothers to teach the importance of early childhood education, especially in families too poor to send their children to kindergarten. The project provides material needs such as books or clothes, and helps mothers learn how to care for their children at home. Volunteers also use the opportunity to educate the women discretely about their rights.

#### BUILDING MICRO LOANS INTO MAJOR INVESTMENTS

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¶9. (SBU) In addition to social protection, KAPA tries to help very poor Qassim women advance economically. A Revolving Loans Project, a variation on traditional micro-finance, gives many home-bound women opportunities to increase their income and support their families through starting micro and small business. The maximum loan of SR3000-60.000 (USD 800-16,000) has helped women start up enterprises ranging from tailoring shops, retailing, poultry production and food processing, to traditional handicrafts production and even sheep breeding. According to KAPA, recapitalization isn,t a major problem with a 93% repayment rate.

¶10. (SBU) At the other end of the economic spectrum, one associate of the Princess described a fairly well-developed commercial banking system for well-established Qassim women, such as those who volunteer for KAPA. She asserted that these women are no longer simply saving, but are actually investing rather aggressively. Indian and Chinese financial instruments were extremely popular, she said. She wouldn,t reveal the value of these investments, but noted it was well

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over SR500 million (USD 133 million).

#### EXPANDING TO SUPPORT CONTINUED GROWTH

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¶11. (SBU) Princess Noura has recently spent much of her own time (as well as her own money according to rumors) coordinating a multi-million dollar expansion of the KAPA facilities. This well-executed expansion, financed with a mix of public and private funds, includes a doubling of training space to incorporate high tech classrooms, a huge state-of-the-art theater, and conference rooms with separate seating areas so men and women can attend events simultaneously. The Women,s Committees of Qassim will host a November 2009 grand opening for what will be one of the largest, most impressive and versatile NGO training facilities for women in the Kingdom.

#### COMMENT

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¶12. (C) Princess Noura has built a strong women,s NGO in the

conservative Nejd heartland combining resources from the central government, Royal connections, including her own, and creative use of programs from donors. However, she would probably be the last person to seek international publicity for herself and her work. Despite her royal status, too much international or even domestic recognition could subject her to fundamentalist criticism, suspicion, and possibly the risk of physical harm.

¶13. (SBU) Embassy Riyadh has discretely worked with KAPA for four years now, identifying and sending four KAPA activists on regional IVs, overseeing a large MEPI-funded Breast Cancer Awareness project and sponsoring various workshops including English language specialists. Ten young women identified from KAPA,s Empowering Young Girls project are presently studying English at a Saudi academy under an Embassy grant. The English study and computer skills acquired at KAPA,s facility will give them additional tools to use in the workplace to perhaps join the cadre of women willing to take on the many social issues that continue to face women in this important Saudi region.

¶14. (C) Princess Noura,s Committees and volunteers are doing exactly the kind of pragmatic, grassroots work that is the chief goal of other activists trying to forge a larger movement focused on achieving practical improvements in the lives of Saudi women. It is unlikely there are links between the Qassim committees and the &Stolen Rights8 movement described in ref. A, because of the risk such links would create for the Qassim women, but there would appear to be a natural affinity between these two groups, as well as with women's organizations in Jeddah that have been pushing to remove barriers to women's full participation in the economy (Ref. C).  
ERDMAN